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Undisciplined media threaten freedom

WINNETKA, Ill. — Famed investigative reporter Seymour Hersch says, "In all my stories, I violate national security."

A journalism class at Columbia University overwhelmingly agrees that military secrets should be published without regard for troop safety.

During Vietnam, then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk asks a U.S. reporter, "Whose side are you on, anyhow?"

In Lebanon, the press identifies the exact location of Marine artillery positions: Within 24 hours, the positions come under fire.

Ben Bradlee of *The Washington Post*, answerable to no elected official, claims he can interpret demands of national security better than an assistant secretary of defense "who might have been selling used cars in Omaha two years ago."

Is this what the citizens who send their sons and daughters off to serve their country really want? Probably not.

In *The Federalist*, No. 75, Alexander Hamilton sagely wrote that the meaning of freedom of the press was indeterminate; it must depend on the ebb and flow of public opinion.

Today, our press probably has greater freedom than in any other country. But still, the press does not "own" the First Amendment; it belongs to all of us. There is no mandate that sets the press above the people. They both have a right to know, and they both have a right "not to know" under conditions established by elected representatives and tempered

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by the courts.

In the long run, the real threat to the First Amendment comes not so much from its misuse by certain members of government who are constrained to operate under a wisely conceived system of checks and balances; it comes

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from an undisciplined press, which largely operates in a power vacuum.

So long as the press refuses to discipline itself, as do most other professions, and so long as the plethora of codes and standards designed to sponsor true professionalism remain largely unobserved, the people's confidence in the press as a privileged institution will erode.

Most certainly, this will be reflected in the meaning we as a people give to the First Amendment. Therein lies the threat to the optimum functioning of our great experiment in democracy.